

Quest for Equitable Education in Phases: Insights From an NGO in China

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Highlights

- Among the East Asian nations, a recurring predicament faced by educational institutions is that of providing inclusive but high-quality education.
- Active involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in education is valuable in China.
- Adream was such an NGO on education in China, established in 2008 with a singular and noble objective: promotion of equitable access to quality education within the disadvantaged regions of China.
- The trajectory of Adream's endeavor to secure equitable access to quality education in rural China stands as a compelling exemplar of the transformative potential that NGOs wield within the realm of education.

Keywords

Educational improvement, educational NGO in China, equitable and quality education

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Challenges in providing basic education in China

A common challenge faced by schools in East Asian countries, despite students' academic excellence, is providing inclusive and quality education. In the vast landscape of China, characterized by its rich cultural diversity and rapid economic growth, the pursuit of equitable access to quality education has always been a monumental challenge. China, as the world's largest developing nation, shoulders the immense responsibility of providing basic education for its vast population. This responsibility, however, is accompanied by a multitude of challenges, both on the demand and the supply sides of the education equation.

On the demand side, an increasing need for improved educational resources catering to students' diverse requirements has been observed. This includes providing for not only academic excellence but also customized education that nurtures all-round development, fostering intellectual growth and emotional and social well-being. Moreover, ensuring that every child has access to quality education is a fundamental right that China, like any other nation, must uphold.

On the supply side, a glaring imbalance can be noticed in the allocation of quality educational resources. This disparity is particularly evident when comparing the well-developed coastal regions of China with its vast inland regions. In the coastal regions, students have access to a plethora of educational choices, well-trained teachers, and state-of-the-art school facilities, while in the remote inland regions, the story is quite different. In these regions, qualified teachers are scarce, classrooms often lack essential infrastructure, and competency-based education is a distant dream.

This rural–urban education divide becomes even more pronounced when we examine international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The 2018 PISA assessment in China revealed exceptional performances in reading, math, and science by 15-year-old students in Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang. However, underlying these achievements is a complex web of challenges, which includes disparities in educational quality, high costs of education, low levels of trust in the system, inefficient resource allocation, and the heavy financial burden on families (Zhang & Jia, 2020). Considering how these issues are prevalent in China's leading educational regions, when projected nationwide, they present an even more daunting picture.

In response to these challenges, the Chinese government has made numerous efforts to reform the education system, often implementing top-down measures. A prime example of such reform is the “Double Reduction” policy, which aims to reduce the amount of homework assigned by public schools and the time spent in doing it while minimizing students' reliance on private tutoring institutions. The underlying concern is that excessive academic pressure, driven by private tutoring, is negatively impacting students' well-being and learning experience. The policy aims to reduce the amount of homework given by public schools and the time spent in doing it so that K-12 students

can spend more time on extracurricular activities and minimize the hours engaged in private tutoring institutions.

This policy has been implemented in response to a widespread concern globally that instruction-related support services may negatively affect student and teacher behavior. Shadow education, a term used to describe private supplementary tuition, may overshadow core education provision (Bray, 2017). Students may prioritize tutoring time and reduce their school attendance prior to high-stakes examinations. For example, in Egypt, tutoring has become a social norm (Sieverding et al., 2019).

However, as the Chinese government strives to address these issues and enact reforms, it is increasingly evident that the public school system, especially in remote areas, requires support from third-sector organizations (TSOs), particularly non-profit and non-governmental organizations (NPOs and NGOs).

Research suggests that in 2019, the year before the private education and training institutions were clamped down, private investors made 2,056 billion yuan out of education, including 11% or roughly \$32 billion from extracurricular tutoring for Chinese K-12 students (iResearch, 2020). With that segment largely removed now, the provision of after-school educational services lies solely with the government. Therefore, its public school system urgently needs support from TSOs, especially NGOs, to deal with the added responsibility.

Globally, NGOs have played a crucial role in bridging the gap between research and practice, providing essential resources, professional development opportunities, and contextual insights for educators and students alike (Hauck, 2020). In China, the role of NGOs in education can be traced to the late 1980s, with programs like the Project Hope gaining recognition as an influential contributor to the nation's education landscape.

In its boom time between 1989 and 2008, the Project Hope built or renewed over 13,000 rural primary schools and sent roughly three million underprivileged kids back to school. Now, as the Chinese government has made K-9 schools compulsory across the country, the NGOs' role in basic education has changed from making schooling available to making quality education accessible to each child.

Adream's journey: In three phases

Founded in 2008, Adream emerged with a singular mission: to advocate for equitable access to quality education in underprivileged areas of China. This non-profit organization was the brainchild of Shirley Pan, a dedicated financier, who, along with her partners, initially pooled their savings to establish a fund in Hong Kong SAR. Later, they founded a foundation in Shanghai, marking the beginning of a journey that would impact the lives of countless children across China.

Shirley Pan and her team did not merely contribute funds toward education. They were inspired by what they witnessed through years of traversing the heartlands of China, where they realized the challenges faced by students and educators in remote areas. Adream's founders were determined to become agents of change, and their journey can be divided into three distinct yet interconnected phases, each aimed at achieving more equitable access to quality education in rural China.

Phase 1: Establishing a budding charity (2008–2012)

In its initial phase, Adream operated as a budding charity with the primary goal of bringing quality educational resources to less privileged areas. This was a period when many education-based charities focused on constructing new school buildings or libraries. However, Adream's approach was unique.

Rather than building from the ground up, Adream focused on refurbishing existing school facilities. Picture a scene from 15 years ago in the high plateaus near Xizang, where Adream's pioneers entered local schools with a proposition to transform an empty classroom into a Dream Center. These Dream Centers would be equipped with books, computers, and internet access, creating a conducive learning environment.

Central to Adream's philosophy was humanistic education, emphasizing student-centered learning and transforming teachers into supportive mentors. The classroom settings in these Dream Centers featured convertible desks and chairs designed to foster a more intimate and caring learning environment.

However, the transformation of classrooms and teaching methods was not always met with enthusiasm in some rural schools. The changes sometimes placed pressure on teachers to upgrade their teaching techniques and develop better relationships with students.

Adream's impact extended beyond classroom refurbishments. The organization introduced a variety of supplementary courses, seamlessly integrated into the regular curricula of the partner schools. This initiative marked a significant departure from traditional rote-based learning, encouraging students and teachers to prioritize creative questioning over quick answers and building trust as an essential foundation for learning.

What set Adream apart from other charities was its commitment to sustaining the supply side of educational programs. The organization offered a diverse range of courses, some developed in collaboration with higher learning institutions and corporate partners. It also established teacher development programs and credit banks to motivate educators to engage with holistic education actively. Adream continually refined its supply chain to reduce costs and maximize the impact of charitable investments.

In essence, Adream built a community of charities centered on love-oriented, cross-sector resource integration. Through these efforts, holistic education was delivered to disadvantaged

schools in a timely and effective manner. In the first five years alone, Adream made a tangible impact, reaching approximately 800 schools (The number of Dream Centers built since 2007 is also shown in Figure 1). This demonstrated that even grassroots charities could earn official approval to enter an increasing number of schools, leaving a substantial imprint on China's centrally controlled education system.

Phase 2: Mobilizing stakeholders for systemwide expansion (2013–2018)

As Adream continued to grow, efficiency became the core focus, particularly given the dispersed locations of its partner schools across vast rural areas. In this phase, Adream emphasized strengthening partnerships across different regions and convincing local educational authorities to share the costs of refurbishing and operating Dream Centers.

In Phase 2, Adream began to focus on the supply side as its partner schools were scattered over widespread regions in rural China, and efficiency became a huge challenge. More integrated partnerships, specifically new partnerships, were built across different regions in this phase.

In doing so, Adream convinced local education authorities to share half of the related costs for refurbishing and operating the Dream Centers. Local governmental agencies were persuaded to supervise and assess how courses were taught in the Dream Courses, how holistic education was integrated into their education development agenda, and how teachers who familiarized themselves with Adream programs through many training opportunities were incentivized.

As an NGO involved in education, Adream has learned to balance its work with the public and private sectors. Over the last one and half decades, Adream has identified two types of key

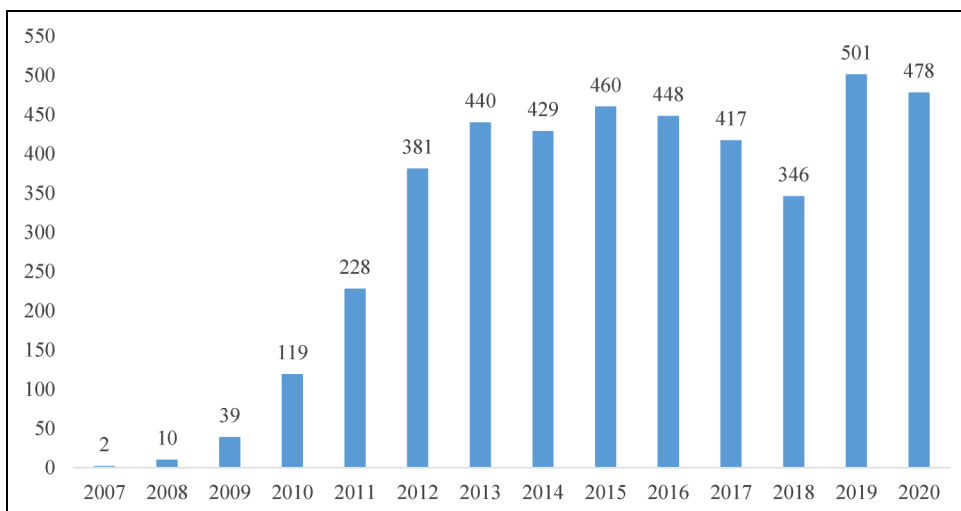


Figure 1. Dream Centers built by Adream since 2007.

stakeholders: donors from the business sector and the general public, and key figures in all levels of governmental agencies who make policies and/or implement them. However, Adream has refrained from classifying them as donors and official agents by treating each as a key actor to engage individually.

The truth is that to advance basic education in terms of both equality and quality, governmental agencies, business sectors, and charities have to work unitedly and collaborate with each other. A weak area in China's development of basic education is the lack of dialogue and collaboration among public, private, and philanthropic sectors. This often complicates the role played by governmental agencies in the provision of basic education and sometimes stifles innovative ideas when the agencies refuse to help TSOs and other organizations in the marketplace.

A practical strategy Adream has adopted is to first consult with the business community and the public and consider their feedback about equality of education and all-round child development. Directing the community's attention to such issues, Adream has been incessantly turning them into voluntary contributors of money, services, or favorable policies. Keeping the cross-sector conversation going helps resolve problems instantly and strengthens Adream's role in promoting new social impact or achieving consensus in social governance. Likewise, funding, including those earmarked for charity, is pumped into schools in a more efficient way, and resources are supplied sustainably toward curriculum development and training for teachers and headmasters.

Second, Adream has enhanced its capacity to collaborate with all levels of governmental agencies, from policymakers to implementers and evaluators. For example, Adream has urged various governmental agencies to support joint funding of Dream Centers, organize teacher salons, and institutionalize peer coaching networks. With Adream's help, government officers in charge of education-related affairs, such as curriculum and instructions, visited classrooms more often to collect feedback on how teachers and students grew in various ways from who they were earlier. The new ways of teaching and novel ideas of education improved the "taste" of these officers in learning and teaching. A growing number of senior educators, particularly headmasters, decided to become "Dream Education" supervisors or ambassadors after they retired from their service in the region. The new role would extend their professional work, thereby providing these retired officials opportunities to remain active in their home counties.

Engaging closely with the public and private sectors, Adream has evolved much, first as a contributor of resources, then as a catalyst lighting the spark to change a larger group of schools. Today, it is a staunch advocate of changes from within to the heart of the ecology of regional education. As a catalyst, Adream aspires to awaken the educator community that is in deep slumber, take them out of the comfort zone, and propel them toward bringing an educational shift from rote learning to cultivating character and competence.

With the strong support of the local governments, Adream could operate by region, each with a larger cluster of Dream Centers, and a peer-coaching salon shared among every 4–6 schools to offer long-term support to rural teachers. To cut a long story short, Adream considered this a decentralized process wherein all parties are Dream partners with a shared interest in overcoming the tremendous challenges of providing equitable quality education in remote areas. A community of Public, Private, and Philanthropic sectors was formed with the joint efforts of experts to help disadvantaged Schools (PPPS model). This PPPS model, by turning beneficiaries into benefactors, generated observable, cohesive outcomes far greater than any single party could possibly achieve.

Phase 3: Improving the ecology of learning (2019–present)

Haunted by the efficacy issue, in 2013, Adream invited members of the Rural Education Action Program (REAP), co-sponsored by Peking University, Shaanxi Normal University, and Stanford University to carry out a complete evaluation of the Adream project. This marked the beginning of an enriching experience in working with the academic sector. Altogether, 166 sample schools from 13 counties were involved in this quantitative research. The REAP survey stayed on watch for three consecutive years, marking a watershed in the journey of Adream. The survey found an increase in students' awareness of right, which was attributable to the Dream Classes where teachers strictly played the role of facilitators and left the class to free discussion among students. It also reported a positive contribution to students' math performance and financial literacy.

However, why did the early collection of 30 Adream courses lead to only three signs of improvement? After much discussion over the REAP survey results, it became clear that Adream needed to remodel its courses one by one under an integrated system. This was done by reordering learning into three blocks: critical thinking, social-emotional learning, and project-based learning. This would lead to (1) a clear-cut outline of the Dream Curriculum, (2) competence-based objectives for each course, and (3) teaching plans for each course. Professor Yunhuo Cui, Director of Institute of Curriculum and Instruction in East China Normal University, led his team to play a key role in helping Adream clarify the objectives of the course and put all the blocks in order. In each of the three blocks, two to three courses were highlighted, for which a separate modeling was developed and feedback was tracked for each.

One of these courses, Dream Journey, has been trending positively for a decade. It is a project-based learning course for students to learn and plan travels in groups. For 18 class hours, students learn the basics of a travel. Four to six students make up a study group. Together, they make plans to travel for a week, a dream journey, to a city thousand kilometers from home. They have a tight budget to maintain, with no parents around. They have to rely on their teammates for the whole trip. Every summer since 2013, hundreds of student groups from disadvantaged family backgrounds have undergone learning by traveling across the country.

In Phase 3, another issue had to be tackled: Adream's partnerships expanded exponentially, with an average of 450 new Dream Centers established each year. This rapid growth posed new challenges. Each region had its unique circumstances and educational objectives. As the number of stakeholders increased, aligning objectives and priorities became increasingly complex.

To address this challenge, Adream initiated a three-year "ecological survey" of regional education, known as Apex Action. This survey aimed to identify the right strategies based on each region's educational context and operational nuances. Seven regions, spanning coastal, central, and western areas of China, were analyzed in terms of critical factors affecting education.

Factors such as development levels, official support, consensus among stakeholders, action plans, degree of standard operation delivery, operational sustainability, intrinsic motivation for holistic education, and more were carefully evaluated. The ultimate goals encompassed analyzing students' ability to nurture personal dreams, examining teachers' understanding of educational philosophy, introducing innovative teaching methodologies, empowering regional teacher development institutions, and categorizing regions based on their access to equitable quality education.

This comprehensive analysis allowed Adream to classify its partner regions into four main categories, each with distinct expectations and needs for hardware, teacher training, courses, and funding. Armed with these insights, Adream adapted its operational toolkit and improvement strategy accordingly.

Conclusion

Adream's journey in advocating for equitable access to quality education in rural China serves as an inspiring example of the transformative impact of NGOs in the education sector. Through three distinct phases, Adream has evolved from a charity providing resources to a catalyst for systemic change in education. The organization's emphasis on efficiency, collaboration, and adaptability offers valuable lessons for addressing challenges in education and achieving equity in educational outcomes.

As Adream continues to deepen its impact and contribute to the ecological changes in regional education, it sets the stage for a brighter future for students in underprivileged areas of China. In an era where equity in education is a global imperative, Adream's story serves as a beacon of hope and a blueprint for positive change. The quest for equitable education in China, once an arduous journey, is now one that bears the promise of brighter tomorrows for millions of students.

It should also be borne in mind that in the process of educational reform, a phenomenon known as the "pendulum effect" (Slavin, 1989) is common in the global wave of educational changes. Each swing of the pendulum includes both upward and downward movements, from enthusiastic reform initiation, rapid expansion, and control assessments to disappointing evaluation results, complaints,

and a shift in interest in reform. The core reason for this pendulum effect can be attributed to reformers' lack of confidence (Slavin, 1989, p. 753), empirical support, and reflection on issues related to social functionalism, efficiency, performance orientation, individualism, and elitism (Goodman, 1995, p. 4).

Furthermore, many theoretical assumptions in educational reform are based on the gold standard of experimental science, random controlled experiments. However, this approach is limited in terms of sample size and control over specific variables, disconnecting it from the extremely complex educational realities in the real world and oversimplifying and idealizing educational practices. Li (2022) observed that the root cause of this pendulum effect in educational reform lies in the lack of direction in education, ambiguity in educational values, and limitations in reform methods. Reformers tend to rely too heavily on experimental data as evidence and lack genuine reflection on the direction of educational progress. An important way to address the misconceptions in educational reform is to shift toward post-reformism or new improvementism.

This would involve building improvement capacity and sustainability as essential elements, objectives, and means of improvement work, advocating the construction of professional improvement communities (Li et al., 2020). Further, sustainability of educational improvement can be promoted with freedom and cooperation as the two goals of improvement work (Chen et al., 2020).

For achieving this, two types of foundational knowledge are required. One is subject matter knowledge, which serves as the basis for improving professional activities and reflects the improver's understanding and grasp of educational progress. The other is professional improvement knowledge, which includes four aspects: understanding systems, understanding variation, constructing knowledge, and insight into human nature (Langley et al., 2009, pp. 75–88). These aspects represent the principles and insights of how improvers engage in improvement.

The methodology of educational improvement, in addition to the aforementioned empirical research and disciplinary orientation, also includes systems thinking. Educational improvement should not be limited to measuring and predicting the effectiveness of reforms based on limited variables, nor should it blindly follow past experiences or seemingly reasonable innovations. Improvement should incorporate a multidimensional perspective that considers social, political, economic, cultural, traditional, and other factors. It should start with small-scale, small-scope changes and gradually promote improvement through cycles of planning, testing, researching, and implementing.

The Carnegie Foundation has proposed six golden standards for reference. Educational improvement should

1. be specific to the problem and user-centered,
2. address the core issue of variation in performance,

3. understand the local context and micro-level processes,
4. ensure measurability of key indicators,
5. anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry through rapid cycles of plan, do, study, act, and
6. accelerate improvements through networked communities and embrace the wisdom of crowds.

Of course, setbacks were inevitable in the brief history of Adream; a massive gap between a “perfect” blueprint of education reforms and the arduous implementation process has been seen. Presently, Adream is marching toward ecological changes to deepen its impact on regional education. Do Adream’s solutions strike a chord with the locals? Will the impact be sustained after Adream’s terms of services expire? Or, will five years of work be good enough to change the educational ecology in a region, or better still, put its education on track for equality? Theoretically, not many research projects have been conducted on regional ecologies of education, let alone studies on how to improve them. Adream is yet to develop the tools and indices in its system now that schools are increasingly self-motivated. With more regional education authorities setting reform agendas in their Five-Year Plans, it is imperative for Adream to dig deeper into tracking and inspiring improvements in the targeted areas. This is how it will set the stage for the future.

Contributorship

The practical case for this article was provided by Shirley Pan from the philanthropic practices of the organization “Adream,” which was also founded by her. The three developmental phases of the practice outlined in the article and the summary of the experiences aimed at promoting equitable education were all provided by her. Bo Wang created the draft of the article, incorporating theoretical analysis frameworks such as educational improvement, and was responsible for corresponding with the editorial office.

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